

Lent 2

Sermon on Psalm 27

Addressing fear - A spiritual path

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When our human actions and reactions are motivated by fear the outcomes are devastating.
And not one of us is immune to fear.

Fear of difference.
Fear of not enough.
Fear of our own inadequacy,
And ultimately
Fear of death.

We read today of Abraham's fear of not being able to have a family, to birth an heir.
We read of Jesus' lived fear, as pressure mounts against his growing popularity that threatened the leaders and authorities of the day.
We read in Psalm 27 - a psalm attributed to David - a man caught in the fear of losing power.

And this week we have experienced the global terror escalated by the mosque shooting in New Zealand.

When our human actions and reactions are motivated by fear the outcomes are devastating.
And not one of us is immune to fear.

Addressing fear is a spiritual process.
And it is our civic responsibility.
Our responsibility to each other and to our earth.

First I want to acknowledge that fear and anxiety are related but different.

Anxiety is our bodies reactions to a stressor, a perceived threat that usually poses no threat to our survival but it generates a heightened anticipation of the future and generates a list of what if's.

Small amounts of anxiety serve humans well, but a constant and intense state of anxiety may constitute dysfunction.

And this state is overwhelming for any person and we may need to seek medical help. Please speak with me, if you do not know where to go for help.

Fear is a little different - fear is the intense emotional state which is activated in response to a real, imminent and objective danger, which threatens life and survival.

They are related when real fears of our past are remembered in our bodies and our minds. And our anxious response to a current situation is amplified by our life histories.
A mix of anxiety and fear.

This Lent we are spending time with poets, contemporary poets and ancient psalmists. Psalm 27, our lection today, is an insiders experience of human fear.

- It begins with prayer that builds confidence in the presence of God as our stronghold,
- The Psalmist describes places where s/he has experienced God's presence and describes the sense of comfort of a place to hide,
- it moves to an honest wavering conversation with God about God's nearness and acceptance (a wavering that depicts an ambivalence to the trustworthiness of God),
- and it ends with a restored inner sense of "Its going to be OK" - wait on the Lord, take heart and wait on the Lord.

This Psalm reveals a pattern of confidence to crisis to resolve.

An inner pattern that often accompanies an experience of fear and a spiritual practice of giving consent and letting go. Trust and surrender.

**Addressing fear is a spiritual process.
And it is our civic responsibility.
Our responsibility to each other and to our earth.**

Moving from fear to trust and surrender is easier said than done.

Writers in the contemplative tradition have given us a path.
And today I want to refer to the life work of the late Fr. Thomas Keating.

The Rev. Thomas Keating was a Trappist monk and a pioneer in the worldwide Christian contemplative prayer movement.
He was born into affluence and privilege in Manhattan, walked away from it all when he entered an austere monastic community in Rhode Island.
Father Keating played a major role in popularizing what is now known as centering prayer, a method of silent prayer that allows one to rest in the presence of God.

Through Father Keating's writing, he has given us a gift of naming the mysteries of the inner life.
And has gifted us with tools to guide us away from fear toward experiencing the love of God - a spiritual practice of consent and letting go.

In his book: *An invitation to Love: The way of Christian Contemplation*, Fr. Keating explores human consents. That is something we need to acknowledge (or trust) in order to experience fullness of life.

For me these consents lay out a pathway to understanding how we become aware of our deep fears and build our muscles of trust and surrender.

The journey of dismantling these fears leads us more deeply into experiencing and behaving as one who is progressively living in union with God, and fullness of life.

(According to spiritual writers Thomas Keating, Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault)

Consider these four consents as formational for our journey of faith:

Consent 1: to the basic goodness of our nature with all of its parts.

In childhood, we are asked to accept the basic goodness of our being as a gift from God and to be grateful for it. The acceptance of our basic goodness does not refer to what we can do or do better than others, but to the goodness of our being before we do anything.

If our childhood environment was filled with fear, rejection, or ambivalent signals of parental affection and caring, or if we are burdened with some physical handicap, our emotions may hesitate to give full consent to the goodness of life.

If we haven't consented to our basic goodness, we will always fear that we are not enough and we get into a spin of doing, trying to prove that we are lovable.

Though our early life relationships affect our sense of basic goodness, later in life, consenting to our goodness can be a spiritual process.

A move toward trusting that what God has made is very good.

And that we are beloved before we do anything!

Consent 2: to the full development of our being by activating our talents and creative energies.

In early adolescence, puberty actualizes the physical side of a much broader energy: our capacity to relate to other people, to emerge out of the isolated world of a child, and to begin to assume responsibility for ourselves and for our relationships.

If relationships are difficult (and we all know they are), we may hesitate to give full consent to the goodness of our sexuality and creative potentialities.

The distortion of emotional development can be seen in persons who suffer from repression or rejection of sexual feelings.

And we may find that we have difficulty relating with genuine warmth to others.

If we haven't consented to our capacity to meaningfully contribute and creativity in the world - we will either fear that we have nothing to offer others and we will disconnect from relationships (fearing that sexual energy will become uncontrollable)

- or sexualize all our interactions - trying to prove that we have the energy to create. I wonder if this is an underlying fear that drives much of our culture today.

Consent 3: to accept that we are dying and surrender the self through illness, old age, and death.

In early adulthood, acceptance of our nonbeing (path to death) is directed to the letting go of everything we love in this world, whether persons, places, or things.

If we have suffered some great loss in early life such as the death of a parent, we may have an excessive fear of dying. Then we hesitate to make this consent.

Moreover, if we have not made the previous consents, this one is more difficult.

If we don't consent to our eventual death, we will live out of a fear of dying, our anxiety for suffering will be constant, and we will not allow life's struggles to be our teacher toward wisdom.

The final consent - Consent 4, is the consent to be transformed.

We might think that everybody would be eager to make this one, but even the holiest people are inclined to say, "Let's not rush into this."

Transformation requires consent to the death of the false self, and the false self is the only self we know.

We are so used to living with fear and our reactions out of it.

Our addiction to security, affection, affirmation, status and/or control, is like a pair of old comfortable slippers (our Lianas blanket).

Whatever its inconveniences, it is at least familiar.

We are often more afraid of the death of being motivated by our fear that we are of physical death.

Making these consents is a process.

A process that involves saying yes to a series of invitations.

The first invitation is paying attention to what life brings up for us, in community.

Our inner responses.

- feeling the emotion
- Naming it to trusted others
- Praying, and reminding ourselves and each other that there is a deeper reality.

When we sense we are not good enough - reminding each other that we are **God's beloved**.

When we sense we have nothing to offer - we remind each other that we are **loved by God before we do anything**.

When we feel overwhelmed by suffering and loss - we remind each other that **God is our stronghold**.

When we fear letting go - we remind each other that **God always has more for us**.

The second invitation is to regularly enter into a place where we can experience the love of God. In silence, in nature, in worship, in solitude.

To wait on God.

God invites us into love, a love that is stronger than fear.

Wait on the Lord, take heart

Wait on the Lord.